

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC

22 February 2019

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Development and Housing Services,
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By e-mail: dc@renfrewshire.gov.uk

Application: 19/0039/PP

Site: Paisley Town Hall, Abbey Close, Paisley, PA1 1JF

Proposal: External alterations associated with the refurbishment of Town Hall including general maintenance and repair.

Remit:

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1978 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in Scotland through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (Scotland) Regulation 2013, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on the above proposal.

Paisley Town Hall is a building of great architectural, historical and social significance, with a Category A listing designation. It is a prominent building at the end of the High Street, with Paisley Abbey to the south. It contains a large Main Hall which has been used for concerts and some degree of theatre use, alongside a number of smaller halls and suites. This proposal seeks to transform the Town Hall to make sure it meets its full potential, that it is viable and is accessible. With regard to the theatre/performance aspect specifically, the project is seeking to make the Main Hall a flagship venue which is capable of hosting a greater number and range of events than at present with improved acoustics, facilities and audience comfort. This project forms part of a suite of interventions to help revitalise Paisley's town centre through an improved cultural offer and bring more people into the town.

We are supportive of the aspirations of this project. The Trust routinely promotes the placemaking benefits of theatres and other cultural buildings and the enhancements they can

Theatres Trust

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Ruth Eastwood, David Ian, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Dara Ó Briain, Simon Ricketts, Peter Roberts, Ann Skippers, Anna Stapleton

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

bring to the local economy and the social and cultural well-being of local people. Paragraph 2.17 of the NPF3 recognises Scotland's towns and cities as cultural hubs; the document also references the utilisation of Paisley's historic buildings to create a 21st Century town centre. The Renfrewshire Local Development Plan cites Paisley as the main cultural and civic hub within Renfrewshire.

There are a range of works proposed within this application, including significant alterations and refurbishments. Primarily our comments will focus on the Main Hall and other aspects of the proposal with particular relevance or implications on performance use.

The applicant is seeking to improve the flexibility of the Main Hall to make sure it can be adapted for different types of shows or purposes with greater ease and speed. At present it can take up to three days to alter the layout, whereas for the hall to be viable and allow contrasting uses on consecutive days this needs to be reduced to a few hours. Further to this, there are also currently challenges faced through poor sightlines and comfort particularly at the balcony and gallery levels. Accessibility requires improvement.

The proposed solution would result in significant alteration and the removal of features of historic significance. Most prominently this means bringing the balcony forward and removing existing decorative columns to serve two purposes. One is to allow for storage space for new retractable seating within the stalls; the columns to be removed would act as a barrier and detrimentally reduce the space and flexibility available when in flat-floor standing format. The other is to effectively bring the balcony forward and maintain capacity in what are some of the hall's best seats. This is due to the current rear rows of the balcony being lost to facilitate an enclosed sound desk and acoustic soundproofing along with level access to and a means of bypassing the 'Loggia' room. The Loggia is an important aspect of the overall project due to its income potential arising from its potential desirability as a function space with external balcony and outlook across to the abbey and gardens. While the loss of existing features is regrettable, there is clear justification set out on the basis of access to the Loggia and balcony being impractical through other means and that the Loggia and balcony are integral to the overall viability of the Town Hall on an ongoing basis. The balcony materials and edges will be reinstated to maintain the existing appearance as far as possible. That said, we would suggest that perhaps some thought might be given to reinstating the rear columns after alteration if an alternative model of retractable seating could be implemented viably though we accept this might reduce available floorspace and capacity.

Seating at balcony and gallery level is currently provided by benches. While these are an original feature and help provide character, they do not provide optimal levels of comfort. Along the slips sightlines are poor. It is proposed that existing benches are to be replaced by new seating, including re-orienting the side balcony seats towards the stage. The impact of this change will be mitigated by retaining benches closest to the stage to retain a reminder of the initial character and layout, which could be sold for full-capacity events such as comedy.

Other alterations within the Main Hall include the lowering of the stage. This will allow for

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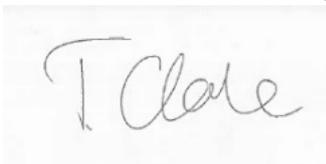
improved sightlines from the stalls. The stage will also be hoisted, allowing for extension of the stalls floorspace for certain types of events along with the storage of furniture within the basement. The existing temporary proscenium arch will be removed and replaced by a demountable curtain. There is to be enhanced acoustics, and a general redecoration of the hall. These are positive moves which will improve the viability of the hall for audiences and performers.

Front and back of house facilities are to be improved, including new dressing rooms. There are a number of opportunities throughout the building to provide bar space and other lounges for audiences. New interventions will provide segregation and clarity between front of house and back of house spaces. This will help improve security and the experience of visitors.

With regards to access and visibility, given the main entrance is orientated away from the High Street and areas of greatest footfall it will be important that an appropriate marketing and wayfinding strategy is in place. This is especially critical given the limitations associated with signage and banners on a building of such significance. There is relatively modest space available within the main entrance foyer, therefore we would also encourage a strategy to manage audience entry and flow particularly for full-capacity events where checks and security may be necessary.

In conclusion, despite the loss of features of historic and architectural significance the proposed alterations within the Main Hall will help to enhance functionality as a performance space, as well as improving audience comfort. It is fair to point out that in addition to the loss of some historic features, within other parts of the building particularly within the function rooms there is to be redecoration which will restore parts of the Town Hall to its previous grandeur. The grand staircase for example is to be extended and restored. We are supportive of this project, and while there may be some opportunities to further refine the layout and design of the Main Hall, **we recommend the granting of planning permission.**

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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